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ABSTRACT

A project examined the ways in which college freshmen constructed a gendered cultural identity in their narratives of events during their acquisition of literacy, and the ways in which teachers constructed the gendered, literate identity of their student authors. Three female teacher-readers were asked to: (1) evaluate the quality of each of 13 student literacy narratives on a scale of 1-10; (2) predict each author's chances for successfully completing college; and (3) guess, using clues from the essays, each author's gender. The teacher-readers were asked to repeat the exercise with the same 13 student narratives 18-20 months later. Results of the project (nine hours of taped and transcribed conversations) indicated that the teachers read texts as male or female despite their claims to the contrary, and that their own literacy practices shaped and were shaped by their own gender identity. Results further identified four different stances which the teachers tried out in their attempts to negotiate the gendered roles of author/writer and authority/teacher: gender blind, gender adherence, gender suppression, and critical/reflective. (PRA)

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ShirleyRose
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Developing Literacy/Developing Gender: Constructing College Freshmen

We employ our literacy skills to construct our cultural roles--including gender identity. Who we are SHAPES how we read and write; just as who we are is SHAPED BY what we read and write; and who we are is shaped by others who compose us as they compose texts.

Recent research on gender in composition studies has paid more attention to ways the reading and writing of texts reflect gender than to ways gender influences the construction of texts by writers and readers.

My own project of inquiry has been to ask "how are written texts involved in the construction of gender roles?" It is important that writing teachers consider this question because the construction of gender roles involves every writer and reader--it is impossible to stop students--or ourselves--from using writing to construct gendered selves (even if we wanted to try to do that) and we can't ignore the importance of gender in our writing practices. My project has two parts: first, I have been examining ways college freshman writers construct a gendered cultural identity in their narratives of events in their acquisition of literacy; second, I have looked at ways TEACHERS of writing construct the gendered, literate identity of student authors. My methodology for this project has been to analyze college freshmanm writers' narratives of experiences in becoming literate and to examine how teachers read these narratives.

In the Fall of 1986, their first semester as GTAs teaching freshman composition, Alice, Celia, and Amanda read thirteen student literacy narratives and made a set of judgments about those narratives and their authors.

These teacher-readers were asked to do the following: 1) evaluate the "quality" of each of the narratives on a scale of 1 to 10; 2) predict, using a scale of 1 to 10, each author's chances for successfully completing college; and 3) guess, using clues from the essays, each author's gender.

In the Spring of 1988, some eighteen to twenty months later, Alice, Amanda, and Celia repeated the exercise, reading the same thirteen student narratives and answering the same questions about the student narratives and their authors. When Alice, Amanada, and Celia had completed their second set of readings, I met with each of them to describe the results of her readings and to explore with her ways she might explain her judgments and interpretations.

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This morning I will review with you what emerged in these conversations, which I recorded and transcribed. I will be quoting from the transcripts, but I can only summarize and sample--I'm selecting from over nine hours of talk. As their comments show, these teachers do read texts as male or female--despite their claims to the contrary. Their comments reveal the ways their own literacy practices have shaped and been shaped by their own gender identity.

This is most evident as we hear them use language to build two separate aspects of the identities simultaneously. Their description of their own writing and their students writing is designed to affirm both their identification with their own gender and their dis-identification with less experienced student writers. Their message is "Yes, I am female, though I'm not like my female students"--or "my female students are not like me."

To organize this discussion, I have identified four different stances these three teachers have tried out in their attempts to negotiate the gendered roles of author/writer and authority/teacher.

The first stance maintains that recognizable differences in writing practices--purpose for writing, choice of subject, form, and style--are not gender-related. I call this stance "GENDER BLIND."

The second stance maintains that women and men write diferently; successful writers adhere to gender-role expectations. I call this "GENDER ADHERENCE"--or in my lighter moments, "the snakes and snails/sugar and spice stance."

The third stance maintains that differences in preferences for particular writing practices may be gender-related, but these preferences must be suppressed in order to conform to the conventional expectations of the rhetorical situation. This stance seems to recommend a kind of cross-dressing or rhetorical "passing"--I call it "gender suppression."

Each of these stances has some appeal and addresses some problems, but leaves one large problem unsolved: assuming any of these first three stances may result in unintentional privileging of male writers or metaphorically "masculine" writing practices.

The fourth stance maintains that discourse conventions themselves must be re-examined. From this stance the teacher/writer reconsiders reasons for privileging particular forms and styles for particular subjects and purposes and revises criteria for evaluating writing. I call this the "critical/reflective stance."

Celia

When we began to talk, Celia made very specific distinctions between the topics chosen by her female students and those chosen by her male students. She noted that the female students' topics were "trivial," "little kid stuff," often about personal relationships while the male students wrote about politics, sports, and things "in the world out there." The women's papers "lacked depth" and had "one general statement after another"

while the men's papers "individualized their ideas." Celia said she appreciated papers in which the writers take risks, and she that she found that male students do this more often than females students.

Celia seems to have tried out the gender suppression stance, acknowledging gendered differences but suppressing them by controlling topic choice and form. She claimed that her women students did better--that is, wrote with more depth-- when the assignment specified a topic such as "religion" and a particular form, such as comparison/contrast). These assignments and topics provided a structure that allowed the women students to "step outside" themselves. "Personal essays" (e.g., autobiographical narratives) seemed more likely to elicit the unfavored responses from female students, so Celia tried to avoid assigning "personal" writing.

Celia's discussion of her own experience as a female writer provided an interesting counterpoint to her teaching practice. She told how she edited out of her own writing "sexual things," "women things nobody'd be interested in," writing about "women bleeding." Though she shifted her position in the later conversation, at first she said that because she considered herself seriously as a writer she had to "stop those kinds of things from coming out." Celia framed this censorship of "female" topics in several interesting ways: she spoke of writing about subjects her mother would object to, she called writing about women's things "not worthy of being literature," and she expressed concern about "revealing too much" about herself.

When Celia explored reasons for differences in male and female student writing, she drew on her own experience. She attributed the differences to socialization--a combination of socialization into a gender role and into a class role. She characterized her women students who are the first generation of their families to attend college as being in "their own little world," in a "little bubble," "little Barbie women" whose role models are taken from their parents, television soap operas, and romance novels. Though Celia condemned these women for their conformity, she identified their backgrounds and experiences with her own.

In our second conversation, Celia flatly rejected the gender blind stance: "If I tried to become gender blind that would certainly go against any feelings I have that men and women are going to be different." In this conversation, focussed more on her experience as a writer than as a teacher of writing, Celia tentatively tried the critical/reflective stance, re-examining discourse conventions and traditions of privileging one form over another. In developing an analogy of learning to write as learning to play the piano by playing ragtime music, Celia explored the need for ignoring "rules" of academic writing in order to eliminate a "block."

Celia developed her theme on the nature of academic writing at some length. The literary criticism she wrote for class was

not as difficult as the fiction she wrote for class or on her own, but it didn't reflect who she was as a writer. Celia likened the literary critical paper to a crossword puzzle--figuring something out with words, knowing what the expectations are, and "never doubt[ing] I could finish it...for academic writing you know what's expected. You know how to make it successful."

In this conversation, Celia speculated, "In a way, I don't think there's anything else to write about but people's relationships with each other"--a claim that seems to be unreconciled with her earlier remarks about the trivial, over-generalized nature of her female students' writing about "my boyfriend" or "my grandma." Celia said that "We [women] could try for centuries and centuries and go through all of man's academic hoops and still never write like [Dante]. We're just not like that. And I don't want to be like that even."

Amanda

Amanda's discussion of her process for reading and identifying the student narratives suggested that she was trying out the gender adherence stance for her teacher/reader role. In her student/writer role, however, she seemed to have chosen the gender suppression stance.

When Amanda discussed how she had drawn on her own experience of reading student texts in order to guess the gender of the narrative authors, she seemed to be trying out the gender adherence stance. At this point she distinguished between male and female topics: Males write about "other issues outside their immediate life. Like Star Wars or Viet Nam or sports." Females write about "family things"; their essays about marriage, dating, and working are "self-involved." Amanda's gendering of these topics was similar to Celia's, but it raises an interesting question: did these writing teachers consider sports a topic "outside" the author's immediate life and dating a "self-involved" topic because of their own or the writers' orientation to these topics?

When Amanda's discussion moved on to descriptions of differences between male and female student behavior, her comments suggested she maintained this "different but equal" gender adherent stance. Males are more creative, but females are more conscientious. Amanda did not seem to privilege one behavior over the other--each leads to the student writer's success. The male is rewarded for divergent behavior (the unusual perspective offered by using humor or irony) and the female is rewarded for obedient behavior (hard work and effort to please indicated by their willingness to revise).

When Amanda began to discuss her own experiences as a writer, the influence of these experiences on her reading of student writing become more obvious. The "plain composition" required in one class was "intimidating" because she had to write about herself and her femaleness "showed up" more, she was "more exposed." In her "academic" writing of "literary papers" she

felt more "androgynous." The academic writing was safer not only because it disguised her gender, but because it disguised her generally. She considered her need to be "safe and reserved" to be a female quality. Though she valued taking chances in writing, she was reluctant to do it as a writer herself.

Amanda seemed to be assuming the third stance, gender suppression, for her own writing when she explored the differences between academic papers and other writing. When she had taken risks with her writing, she had found it exhilarating, but writing for her courses didn't "provide much opportunity to do that kind of writing." She characterized academic papers as "idea writing" and other writing as "personality writing" and idea writing is not gender specific, because "When I think of an idea, I don't not feel like a female." In her non-academic writing, she believed, her gender was more evident. Amanda's final comments in our first conversation indicated just how important gender was to her: "I have to say that in my heart I feel that the fact that I'm a female has affected things.. It's not that I have any regrets or anything, but I think in terms of my expectations, you know, and parents' expectations, too."

In our second conversation, Amanda further explored the connections between her own writing experience and the way she was teaching writing. In this conversation, the issue of gender was less explicit than before, but it confirmed that Amanda's experiences as a writer had had a profound effect on her ways of teaching writing--an effect which had become even more profound as she matured as a teacher and began to consciously draw on that experience. In the second conversation, Amanda talked at length about the way her pedagogy had developed--she first used theory and research to understand and change her own writing practice and then used that writing experience to inform her teaching practice. For example, she didn't emphasize revision in her classes until she saw how it changed her own writing. Similarly, Amanda's understanding of the role of gender in her students' writing and in her response to their writing had been determined by her evolving understanding of the influence of gender in her own writing practice.

Alice

Alice, like Amanda, indicated that she drew on cultural stereotypes to help her guess the gender of the narratives' authors--crying is a clue that the author is female; mentioning a good friend with the characteristically male name "Scott" is a clue that the author is male.

Though Alice briefly tried out a gender-blind stance when she claimed that she didn't see things she would regard as "typically feminine or typically masculine" in her readings of the student narratives, she quickly abandoned this position for the gender adherent stance and began to distinguish between male and female writers in her own classes. Alice's description of these differences suggested a certain amount of ambivalence--her characterizations of male and female writers both endorsed and

condemned: Male writers take more risks, are more adventurous, yet they use word patterns that are "pretentious" and employ "stylistic flash"; Women writers are more conservative, more thoughtful and probing, work more on substance, but their style lacks voice and personality.

When Alice first began to discuss her own experience as a writer, she did not explicitly acknowledge the influence of gender. She characterized her own writing as "analytical. scholastic, and dry." She mentioned her attempts to "add more personality" to her writing and her ethical valuing of the "voice" she felt was missing in her own writing--ingredients she had earlier said she found wanting in her female students' writing.

As she began to explore the importance of her gender to her writing practice, Alice discussed how it had determined her purposes or uses for writing. She had used it to sort out her ideas ahead of time so she could participate in and contribute to a conversation with men. Writing had been a way of "taking my own life into my own hands and pursuing my ideas and seeing my own things I wanted to do."

Alice then moved on to consider the relationship between gender and discourse forms in her own writing. Her answer to my question whether gender had been an issue for her as a student was remarkable: "No. I don't think so. I think that I wrote very masculine papers." For Alice, suppressing her gender in her writing had apparently necessarily meant presenting herself not as androgynous but as masculine. Looking back on that writing experience, Alice was disappointed in herself because that writing was not personally compelling. This suggests that Alice had come to believe that good writing is true to the writer's self and because her self was feminine, her "masculine" writing--with its categories, outlines, and charts--was a kind of failure or ill-fitting garment: "what was frustrating at the time was that I would...write these papers and I would feel completely let down, that somehow I had reduced the complexity of what went into this cut and dry system and that was something that was very hard for me. It seemed the teacher liked that."

In our second conversation, Alice said her women students often found conventional academic forms "unimaginative." In this discussion, she seemed to be trying out the critical/reflective stance--acknowledging gender-related differences in written discourse practices and arguing for a broadening of conventional expectations. Her description and argument drew from her experiences as a writer and as a reader of both student writing and published writing. While her own teachers had implicitly suggested that "it didn't matter what you were interested in, you had to elevate your tastes beyond yourself," in her own teaching, Alice valued evidence of personal interest.

Like both Celia and Amanda, Alice used her own writing experience to guide her as a teacher of writing. For Alice, as for Celia and Amanda, being female had influenced her construction of herself as a writer.

Construction of Student Writers' Gender:

Though each of the teacher-readers noted that they had had trouble with the "gender guess" portion of the reading exercise, all three made distinctions between the writing of males and females when they talked about their own students. However, all three expressed, at one point or another, a reluctance to make or a desire to qualify their generalizations along gender lines. They were all aware that naming discrete characteristics for female writing and male writing was an "indiscretion."

The fact that they had difficulty in assigning gender to anonymous essays yet were able to characterize the writing of their own male and female students in oppositional terms suggests that for these teacher/readers, perceptions of their students' gender played a part in their construction of their student writers. Gender generalizations played a part in constructing their reading of writers whose gender they knew (their students), but they couldn't successfully or comfortably work from the other direction, drawing on their gender generalizations to help them construct the gender of writers they did not know.

Construction of Own Gender:

These three teacher-readers acknowledge and appreciate what their teaching experience has taught them about being writers themselves as well as what their own writing experience has taught them about teaching writing, but they are reluctant to make explicit connections between their own gendered writing experience, their construction of their own gendered literacy, and their construction of their students' gendered literacy. Despite a couple of explicit denials, their conversations betray that for these teacher-writers, gender identity has been a factor in constructing their own literate identities.

For these three writer-teachers, the acts of writing and evaluating students' writing became more problematic once they moved toward acknowledging that the construction of gender is an element of the construction of texts by both writer and reader. None of them had found the simple, comfortable solution all three were seeking. Their searches, as presented in these conversations, are representative anecdotes for the rest of us who look for ways to acknowledge and account for the gendering of authority.

The use of literacy to construct gender is an issue we cannot ignore--for it is a necessary, though problematic, activity in the culturally creative processes of reading and writing. Our practices of constructing gender identities for ourselves by writing and our habit of constructing the gender identities of others, both learned from our experience with texts, influence our reading of student writing as well. We cannot deny it, but neither can we accept it uncritically.